SHAPING A LIFELINE: HARNESSING THE POWER OF LEBANESE MEDIA TO COMBAT SUICIDE IN LEBANON

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POLICY BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The policy brief highlights the role of media in reporting on suicide and its potential impact on suicidal behaviors. It emphasizes that responsible reporting can play a crucial role in suicide prevention by focusing on help-seeking and positive coping strategies. It also highlights the impact of detailed, explicit, sensational, and repetitive reporting on leading to suicide contagion effects especially among vulnerable individuals such as youth, who are more susceptible to copying suicidal behavior portrayed in the media. The policy brief notes the often oversimplification of the causes of suicide by the media, neglecting the critical role of mental illness. The brief describes different time periods in the last few years which were associated with more media coverage and possibly correlated with higher rates of deaths by suicide in the weeks that followed. It also mentions the increase in media attention to suicide coinciding with the ongoing political and economic crisis in the country. The brief concludes with recommendations for journalists and media outlets, urging them to adopt responsible and accurate reporting practices while avoiding sensational details, excessive coverage, invasion of privacy, and misrepresenting the news of suicide.

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SUICIDE REPORTING

Suicide is a major public health problem worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that globally more than 703,000 people die by suicide each year. Worldwide, suicide ranks as the 18th leading cause of death across the lifespan and the second leading cause of death among people aged 15 to 29 years old [1]. Generally, suicide is a preventable consequence of mental illness and suicide prevention is possible if mental disorders are detected and treated in a timely manner, and when environmental factors such as public education and responsible reporting of suicidal behaviors in the media are in place [2,3].

Multiple studies have examined the association between media reporting and suicidal behaviors and have shown that media coverage can either increase or decrease the likelihood of suicidal behaviors. In fact, media reporting of suicide has been found to be associated with an increase in suicide rates due to a contagion effect [4–7]. This is known as the Werther Effect, a reference to Goethe's novel published in 1774 on a troubled young man who was rejected by the woman he loved which resulted in his death by suicide [5]. The impact of media coverage on suicidal behaviors tends to peak within the first three days and lasts for two weeks or more depending on the extent and nature of the coverage [8-10]. More suicide deaths are likely to occur after detailed (specifying the person's name and the method used), explicit (headlines with the word "suicide" and method used), sensational and repetitive reporting of suicide [6,9]. Vulnerable individuals are at higher risk of copying the suicidal behavior described in the media [8,9] especially if media

reports are related to a celebrity or individual with a high social status (8,10). This is mostly evident among youth who may be more susceptible to social learning (11,12). Unfortunately, the media often oversimplifies the causes and triggers of suicides, by focusing on single factors, such as financial problems or relationship issues, while ignoring the most common and critical role of mental illness (13). Moreover, the degree to which media coverage affects suicidal behaviors varies depending on the type of media. For example, newspapers stories or social media news are more likely to lead to a copycat effect than television news because they can be saved and re-read (14). Additionally, the way traditional media covers suicide has an impact on how it is covered on social media, which is largely unregulated (15–17), and exposure to suicidal behavior through social media has been associated with an increased risk of suicidal ideation (18,19).

Responsible reporting on suicide, which focuses on help-seeking and positive coping, can play a crucial role in preventing suicide. The Papageno Effect is a phenomenon (counter to the Werther Effect), in which media coverage of positive outcomes resulting from a suicidal crisis, such as the use of effective coping strategies, is associated with a lower incidence of suicide (9). Several actions have been found to have a significant impact on successfully reducing the risk of media-induced suicide contagion (20). The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed guidelines for media professionals to prevent suicide, and a Tool for Evaluating Media Portrayals of Suicide (TEMPOS) has been created to help media professionals, researchers, and suicide prevention experts assess adherence to these recommendations (21).

Given the potential for both harmful and protective effects of media reporting on suicide, it is essential to approach this issue with caution and sensitivity. Decisions about how to report on suicide require collaboration between the mental health community and media personnel. Mental health professionals can provide the media with the best available information to make decisions about how to report on suicide, with the goal of minimizing the risk of contagion (2,22).

BACKGROUND: SUICIDE IN LEBANON

In Lebanon, the suicide rate has been estimated to be between 1.87 and 2.4 per 100,000 capita, with an average of one person losing their life to suicide every 2.1 days (23). Despite efforts by national stakeholders to increase awareness and normalize discussion of suicide, the topic remains highly stigmatized and taboo in Lebanese culture. Currently, the only source of data on the prevalence of suicide in the country is the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF), which documents these numbers annually. However, it is likely that these numbers are underreported, as family members may avoid disclosing the real cause of death when a loved one dies by suicide.

In recent years, there has been increased awareness of this public health problem, and suicide has gained more media attention. This attention has coincided with a series of local political, social, and economic events that are shaping the mental health situation in the country. As a

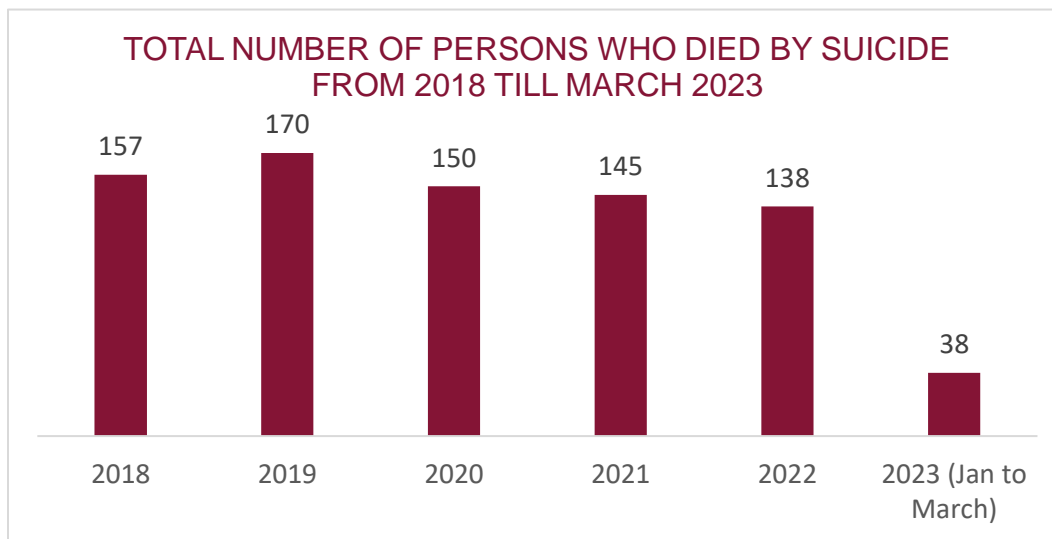result, suicide has appeared more prominently in the media, often in relation to these contextual events.

Figure 1. Total number of persons who died by suicide from 2018 to March 2023
Total number of persons who died by suicide in 2019 is of 170

Lebanon has been in the midst of an ongoing and deteriorating political and economic crisis since 2019, described by the World Bank's Lebanon Economic Report (2021) as a deliberate depression (24). This crisis has led to the devaluation of the Lebanese Lira, which reached a high of LBP 140,000 for the dollar in the first quarter of 2023. In December 2019, two months after the onset of the October 17 revolution, Lebanon witnessed a wave of media reporting of deaths by suicide. As per ISF numbers, the total number of deaths reported during this month was 15, compared to the monthly average of 14, reported across the same year. Multiple consecutive deaths by suicide were being highlighted in the media after a death was reported at the end of November 2019 where the death was directly linked to the economic crisis.

The media coverage of these suicides featured headlines such as "Suicide over mounting debt crisis" (25), "Protestors hold mock funeral for Lebanese man who committed suicide over pay cut" (26), and "Suicide epidemic sweeps Lebanon amid economic downturn" (27).

During this period, Lebanon was witnessing active protests and citizens were highly charged and fueled with anger and frustration at the economic and political situation, rightly so. However, this momentum contributed to a high politicization of the deaths that took place during this period, automatically attributing them to the economic situation and to the injustice committed by

politicians. As a result, the deaths were sensationalized in the media, and the coverage was not always responsible or sensitive to the impact on individuals and communities.

TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS WHO DIED BY SUICIDE IN 2019 PER MONTH

January 18, February 10, March 9, April 20, May 18, June 17, July 18, August 22, September 5, October 7, November 11, December 15

Figure 2. Total number of persons who died by suicide in 2019 per month

While social and economic determinants of mental health can increase vulnerability and worsen risk factors associated with the development or exacerbation of mental illnesses that may lead to suicide, there is little evidence to suggest that one risk factor alone, such as poverty, unemployment, or economic deterioration, can be a sole cause for an increase in nationwide suicide [28].

To better understand the relationship between media coverage and suicide rates, it is important to examine the data on suicide deaths in Lebanon in the past few years. In 2019, the highest number of suicides occurred several months before the economic crisis hit its peak. The highest number of deaths by suicide was recorded in August 2019 (n=22), followed by April 2019 (n=20), and January 2019, May 2019, and July 2019 (18 deaths each month).
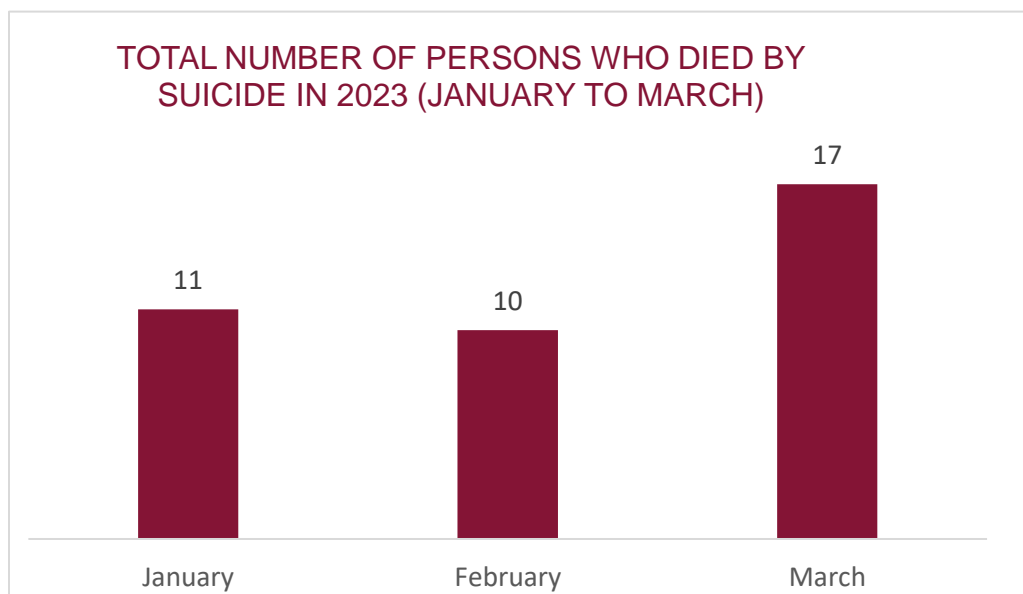
Figure 3. Total number of persons who died by suicide in 2023 (January to March)

Total number of persons who died by suicide from January till March 2023 is of 38

Strangely, there was no excessive media reporting on suicide during these months. The number of suicide deaths decreased to 5, 7, and 11 in September, October, and November 2019, respectively. In December, the number of suicides increased once again, which may be attributed to the suicide contagion effect resulting from prominent media coverage which started at the end of November 2019 after the death of a citizen which was heavily reported and correlated with the socio-economic situation. Similar stories emerged in the weeks that followed, and numerous suicide attempts were being documented.

Between 2020 and 2023, Lebanon's suicide rates did not witness any increase, and on the contrary were declining from the high of 170 deaths in 2019. This decrease may be associated with the global pandemic that hit in 2020 and the disaster of the Beirut Blast in August 2020. Natural disasters and nation-wide catastrophes have been known to be associated with lower suicide rates due to factors of increased solidarity and heightened existential angst [29].

In March 2023, Lebanon again witnessed a similar heightened attention in the media on suicide reporting. Similarly, media headlines reported suicide as "choice for Lebanese unable to feed their children" [30] and other headlines spoke about "new waves of suicide" and titles also merged suicide and crime rates in one headline, talking about an increase in both. Compared to the initial two months of the year, the number of suicides in March 2023 increased to 17 (Figure3), and if we compare this number to similar periods (March of previous years where there was no noticeable media coverage), this number is the highest in March of 2023 (Figure 4). These numbers may allude to a possible contagion effect that is coinciding with increased media coverage.
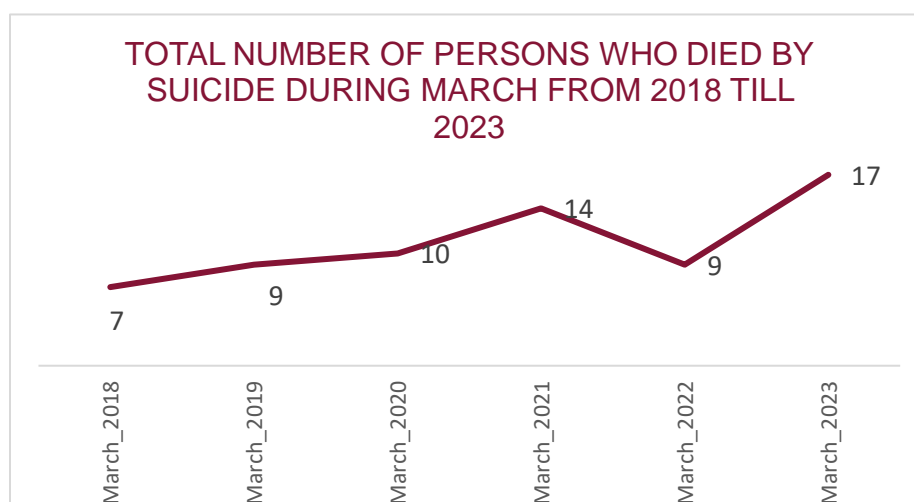
Figure 4. Total number of persons who died by suicide during March from 2018 till 2023

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA OUTLETS

The goal of this policy paper is to encourage journalism and media outlets in Lebanon to adopt more responsible and accurate reporting practices regarding suicide and adjust certain misconceptions that may exist about the role that media reporting can play. The paper recommends working collaboratively with these outlets to align their reporting with international guidelines, and to address the challenges associated with publishing suicide news both offline and online. The recommendations are intended to inform all stakeholders involved, including journalists, editors, TV or podcast producers, and policymakers, and to help them make informed decisions about reporting on suicide that minimize public harm. It is important to emphasize that these recommendations are not meant to dictate how media personnel or other stakeholders should do their jobs, nor do they impinge on their freedoms. However, aligning with established media guidelines on suicide reporting has been shown to improve the quality of reports, and may play a significant role in reducing suicide rates, as has been demonstrated in some countries (21, 24-26).

> " Journalists and media outlets need to adopt responsible and accurate reporting practices while avoiding sensational details, excessive coverage, invasion of privacy, and misrepresenting the news of suicide and focusing on help-seeking and positive coping strategies. "

The recommendations on what to avoid are mentioned below and describe how each recommendation, if not properly addressed, may impact future deaths by suicide.

WHAT TO AVOID

Using excessive and sensational details

- Sensational information refers to language, images or headlines that are meant to attract attention or increase viewership or readership. It may include language that describes the death as quick, painless, or a solution to a problem. It may also refer to descriptions of the site of the death, describing it as a "hot spot" or other glorifying terms. It also includes photos, usually of the means of death by suicide, or detailed description of the method of suicide and suicide notes the deceased may have left.
- Sensational information can contribute to glorifying or glamorizing the person who has died by suicide and might lead others to identify with the story and perpetuate thoughts of death and killing oneself.
- It is crucial to be aware of the statistics when reporting on the issue in order to use appropriate language. Terms such as "rise", "spike" or "wave" of suicide should be used with caution as they man not accurately reflect the situation. Sometimes, an increase in the number of reported suicides may be due to greater awareness of the issue, or coverage rather than an actual increase in rates. Suicide rates can also fluctuate throughout the year, making it important to consider longer time frames of three years or more when analyzing trends. Misrepresenting the facts by sounding false alarms on rising suicide rates can have harmful consequences. It may contribute to the normalization of suicide, leading to the belief that it is an acceptable response to challenging life circumstances. To promote responsible reporting, it is essential to present accurate and evidence-based information while avoiding language that sensationalizes suicide.

Prominent or excessive coverage

- Prominent coverage refers to highlighting suicide news on the front pages of media outlets such as newspapers or showing prominent photos of the deceased person or the methods of suicide.
- Prominent or excessive coverage can lead to misrepresentation either intentionally or unintentionally as it may allude to the public that the problem is more common, or prevalent than it is, leading to public panic over the issue or to contagion and increased deaths resulting from suicide contagion.

Invasion of privacy

- Invasion of privacy can include reporting of the details of a suicide or suicide attempt, or the sharing of personal incidents related to the suicide such as suicide notes or voice messages. It can also include interviewing family members immediately after the death occurs without consideration for the privacy and dignity of persons involved.

- Reporters may have access to police officers or paramedics who were present on the scene and who may provide specific and graphic details of the incident. These details may also be considered as invasion of the privacy of the deceased and their family members and should be avoided in reports or stories due to the harm they may cause not only to family members, but also to the public at large.

Simplifying or misrepresenting the news of suicide

- Simplifying or misrepresenting the news of suicide includes attributing it to a single cause or describing it as a solution to a specific problem, often reducing the complexity of this phenomenon. For example, the media may focus on a single factor, such as relationship problems, unemployment, debt, or other reasons, and fail to consider the many other factors that may have contributed to a person's decision to take their own life.
- This can create a false impression that suicide is a simple and easily preventable phenomenon, which is not the case. It can also lead to a lack of understanding about the true nature of suicide and can hinder efforts to prevent it. Furthermore, it can lead to increased feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and shame among those struggling with mental health issues, preventing them from seeking help or talking about it.
- It is important to note that the phenomenon of suicide is multifaceted and involves a range of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors, among other underlying causes. The decision to take one's own life is often the result of these complex interactions, individual circumstances, and life experiences.

BEST PRACTICES: WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT LOSS OF LIFE?

When possible, refer coverage of suicide topics to health reporters instead of crime reporters.

In Lebanon, we generally lack journalists who are specialized in certain areas of reporting, which tends to result in the news of suicide being reported by all journalists, irrespective of their area of specialty or sector coverage. Generally, when possible, it is recommended that health reporters cover this news instead of crime reporters as crime reporting includes coverage that is typically graphic and sensational which is the current trend in Lebanese media today in the coverage of suicide. Similar images and headlines are used to report both crime and suicide – contributing to misrepresentations about suicide, and promotion of contagion. Health reporters are typically more aware of the complexity of suicide and the underlying mental health problems and can cover the topic from a more holistic perspective. Other journalists across disciplines are recommended to consult with their colleagues who are health reporters, or with mental health professionals when interested in covering the topic of suicide.

WHY IS THIS STORY IMPORTANT? ASK YOURSELF WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF SHEDDING LIGHT ON THIS STORY VERSUS THE POTENTIAL HARM IT MAY BE CAUSING

Journalists often seek media interviews with the main question behind the story being to investigate why the rate of suicide is increasing, when in fact in Lebanon, most times when news of suicide was prominent in the media, there was no real data indicating there was an actual increase.

If the data is indicative of an actual rise in national prevalence of suicide, then it might be worthy to write about this story to highlight suicide as a public health problem and to address the various social, psychological, and medical factors that may be contributing to this increase.

If the main intention behind covering the news of suicide is to make direct associations with local factors such as political uprisings, economic recessions, pandemics, or other nation-wide current affairs in order to also shed led on these factors, it is important to consult with health experts to really understand if there is any recent evidence or studies suggesting these correlations.

CONSULT WITH SUICIDE PREVENTION EXPERTS OR ORGANIZATIONS IN THE COMMUNITY

When covering the topic of suicide consulting with mental health experts will aid in providing a holistic, scientific, and more nuanced perspective on the topic.

CONSIDER SPECIAL GUIDELINES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media platforms play a crucial role in collaborating with mental health professionals and organizations to ensure appropriate propagation of educational messages that can prevent suicide. Several social media platforms such as Facebook have implemented safety measures in the past few years including buttons that direct at risk individuals posting about suicide to their safety center to learn more about helpful resources. These buttons are also directed to third parties who are concerned about someone posting about suicide and provide guidelines on how to support them.

Social media pages are advised to include resources on where to receive help in Lebanon, and include in each post covering suicide information on how to reach the National Lifeline (1564).

Disabling the comments section on posts or stories is a main recommendation for social media platforms, as opening up the comments section can lead to the sharing of information or opinions that may further glorify the suicide death, make inaccurate speculations, promote suicide, and or harm family and friends of the deceased through inappropriate or offensive content.

INCLUDE TRIGGER WARNINGS AND REFERENCES FOR SUPPORT

Each report, post or story on suicide should include a trigger warning for vulnerable persons who are reading it, as well as resources on how to seek help. Lebanon is one of only 38 countries that has developed a suicide prevention strategy (31) and is the only country in the MENA region that operates a national suicide prevention hotline. It is crucial that every story reporting on the news of suicide is associated with references to seek help, in this case, the National Lifeline (1564) in Lebanon should be reported, and the following statement can be used at the end of each report or publication.

"If you or someone you know are struggling with thoughts of suicide, reach out to the National Lifeline (1564), where trained volunteer operators will be available to listen to you and assist you through your crisis, and can refer you to specialized mental health support."

While the cost of mental health services can be prohibitive to many, it is important that news articles highlight that accessible services exist. Media reports can also raise awareness about the availability of primary health care centers that are integrated with mental health services which offer these services for free and are accessible to everyone. A link can be made to the National Mental Health Program's social media platforms or the National Lifeline (1564) which can provide information and orientation to these primary health care centers.

USE THIS OPPORTUNITY FOR POSITIVE AND IMPACTFUL COMMUNITY CHANGE

Raise awareness about mental health and break societal taboos

Journalists should not typically wait for a death by suicide or multiple deaths to occur to talk about suicide. However, if it happens that the media has taken an acute interest in this subject, journalists can use this opportunity to raise awareness about mental health and encourage breaking the stigma that exists today among a large percentage of the population when it comes to talking about mental health. Mental illness affects 25% of the population (1 out of 4 persons) in Lebanon with these numbers expected to have risen in the past few years, while only 1 out of 10 individuals seek care due to various reasons, including stigma, lack of knowledge, and financial resources (32).

Highlight and raise awareness about mental illnesses that are closely linked with suicide or suicide attempts.

90% of suicides are related to the presence of a mental illness (33), however this statistic is rarely highlighted when media outlets tackle stories or news of suicide. Raising awareness about the different signs and symptoms of mental illnesses that may lead to suicide can have a higher impact on preventing future deaths by suicide, which ultimately should be the guiding principle behind writing a news piece or highlighting suicide in the media. Several mental illnesses can be highlighted that are often not discussed enough in our society including schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder and substance and alcohol use. It is important to highlight that these mental illnesses can be treated, and that treatment can prevent persons from attempting suicide.

HIGHLIGHT METHODS FOR ACCESSING SERVICES OR LOBBYING FOR CHANGE IN GOVERMENTAL PLANNING AND SPENDING ON MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health spending currently constitutes less than 5% of government spending on health (34), of which mostly used to be allocated to inpatient spending. With the economic crisis, these funds have been reduced and both hospitals bills as well as outpatient consultations are now being dollarized, making mental health services a luxury service that can be afforded by the few. In the case of coverage of news on suicide, these reports can be used to highlight the importance of accessibility of mental health services and push policy makers to undertake the coverage of mental health services within national insurance coverages, within private insurances, as well as prioritize funding for mental health within government budgets.

PUBLIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Media guidelines for the reporting on suicide are most effective when multiple stakeholders are working together towards their implementation. This includes a critical role for not only journalists, but also journalism and media schools and university curricula, public health experts, government experts, mental health professionals and suicide prevention experts. Media reporting on suicide can have a nation-wide impact on its prevention. Given this criticality, nation-wide recommendations may include:

1. A commitment to engage public and private universities in Lebanon to include in their curriculum guidelines and objectives to teach graduate students ethical reporting when it comes to suicide and mental illness. The "Practical guide for media professionals on the coverage of mental health and substance use" which was published by the National Mental Health Program at the Ministry of Public Health serves as an important tool that can be taught at media schools across Lebanese universities [35].
2. Providing media training to mental health professionals who may be asked to engage in media interviews on the topic of suicide.
3. Establishing a national representative media monitoring committee that can collaboratively engage with media platforms and personnel when news of suicide is published that can contain harmful or misguided information on the reporting of suicide.
4. Involving media professionals in capacity building training on responsible suicide reporting that would be considered as part of their continued education development processes.
5. Nominating media professionals for media awards on responsible reporting of suicide and adherence to suicide reporting guidelines.

CONCLUSION

Media reporting on crucial public health issues can serve as a vital lifeline. After enduring a global pandemic for three years, we have come to increasingly recognize the life-saving impact that media can have. When it comes to reporting on suicide as well, the media can be a lifeline that promotes prevention and provides individuals at risk with the opportunity to seek the necessary support, rather than exacerbating their distress and isolation.

In a world where every life holds value, and in a country where fostering safety and well-being has become an even greater challenge, ensuring that people in need receive the healthcare services they deserve is paramount. Shedding light on suicide in a manner that aligns with international guidelines and utilizes evidence-based information is crucial. The recommendations outlined in this policy aim to guide journalists, editors, and policymakers in adopting more responsible reporting practices that can contribute to suicide prevention efforts. Only through collective action can we promote public awareness, understanding, and support for mental health issues while minimizing the risk of suicide contagion. Media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors concerning suicide. Without thoughtful consideration and insight into why and how suicide news is covered, countless lives may be endangered. By adhering to responsible reporting practices, media outlets can become powerful allies in the fight against suicide, fostering a society that prioritizes mental health and safeguards the well-being of its members.

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